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Recommended Citation

Damai, Puspa. "Terror, Hospitality and the Gift of Death in Morrison's *Beloved*." *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* 1.1 (2014): 1-18.

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Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry

Issue: *Terror and the Literary*, Vol. I No. I

Editors: Arka Chattopadhyay and Sourit Bhattacharya

Email: editors@sanglap-journal.in

Link: <http://sanglap-journal.in/>

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Autoimmunitary Terror

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, two reductionist critical paradigms have dominated contemporary theorization of terror and terrorism: “us *versus* them,” and “America got what it fantasized about.”¹ The first paradigm – mainstream in scope, rudimentary in its analytical strength, and jingoist in texture – locates the origin of terror in the other, the other of the West and of democracy. In contrast, the second paradigm – radical and theoretically sophisticated – locates terror in the virtual or phantasmatic “reality” of the West depicted in mainstream media and Hollywood movies. If the first paradigm implies that the West is threatened by a radical other from “outside,” the second suggests that terrorism invites the West, to cite Slavoj Žižek, the proponent of this view, to “the desert of the real” in the fashion of Orpheus welcoming Neo in *The Matrix* (2002: 16). The second paradigm entwines hospitality and terror by interpreting September 11 as a welcome extended to the First World by its other. This article intends to scrutinize this characterization of the West as the guest of the other as terrorist. Together with the first narrative, this paradigm also fails to examine the West in general and America in particular for their long and complex history of involvement and intimacy with terror. Though diametrically opposed in their import, these two paradigms curiously converge insofar as they conflate terrorism and the Third World. Even though Žižek identifies America’s disturbing obsession with “disaster movies” – which leads him to argue that September 11 is an uncanny return and actualization of America’s own terrorizing fantasies, he also depicts terrorists as the other, the outsider, the Third World. Framing the discussion of the September 11 attacks in the Lacanian discourse of the Real, Žižek writes that before the World Trade Center collapse “we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the (TV) screen – and what happened on September 11 was that this

fantasmatic screen apparition entered our reality” (Zizek 16). In other words, September 11 is the becoming real of the Third World from the disaster movies in order to invade the First World. But terror in the United States runs deeper and historically further back than Zizek’s disaster movies and closer to home than Samuel Huntington and Company’s “us versus them” narrative. In this essay, I propose that we move beyond these two paradigms in order to engage with and critically examine the history of terror within the United States. I contend that a look at Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* allows us a vantage point to scrutinize the scenes and sites of terror closer to “home” in the United States, which in turn would complicate and expand our constricting understanding of terrorism as the threat from or invasion by the other.² Instead of being a relatively recent phenomenon, terror in the United States has a complex and long history.

America has historically sought regeneration through violence against Native Americans and other minorities. Patrick Wolfe misses the point when he restricts what he dubs as the “logic of elimination” to the violent displacement of “Indians,” and excludes African Americans from the settler colonial structure in the United States (2006: 389). As Charles W. Mills has shown, “the incredible body count of slaving expedition, the Middle Passage, “seasoning” and slavery itself; the state-supported seizure of lands and imposition of regimes of forced labor” in the U.S. resulted in the “ontological shudder” of “white terror” (1997: 83, 86).

Reading *Beloved* in relation to terror is a critical exercise not completely foreign to the Morrison scholarship. Morrison herself relates the novel to terror and torture in her interview “The Pain of Being Black” (1994), where she reveals that during her research for the novel, she discovered multiple instances of “torturous restraining devices” such as bells and masks used to track slaves or to stop them from eating the sugar cane. These devices were different from “the restraining tools, like in the torture chamber” (Morrison 258), for the slaves must wear them even when they worked. The mask had holes in them but “it was so hot inside that when they took them off, the skin would come off” (Morrison 257). The novel historicizes terror in the United States without failing to yield critical insights into the nature of present day terrorism. One is bound to encounter terror whichever angle one adopts to interpret *Beloved*. If one reads

the novel as a neo-slave narrative, one ends up finding torture of slaves in the South.³ When we deploy the lens of trauma studies, we discover in the novel Morrison's attempts to speak the unspeakable collective memories of African Americans. It is a rich haunt for those hunting for the gothic involving haunted houses, ghosts and the fear associated with the return of the undead. Even innocent categories such as parental love become murderous, revengeful, excessive, horrific and transgressive. And of course, if we look at the question of race and gender, we not only see whiteness associated with terror, but we also find the signature of terror and torture inscribed on the body of the protagonist, Sethe. bell hooks writes that, in *Beloved*, "the memory of terror is deeply inscribed on the body of Sethe and in her consciousness, and the association of terror with whiteness is so intense, that she kills her young so that they will never know the terror" (2009: 103). Without realizing it, critics who have examined *Beloved* from as diverse a perspective as trauma theory, slavery, the Civil War, feminism, race or the gothic, have articulated the horror and the terror in her works. J. Hillis Miller directly examines the novel from the point of view of terrorism today as if to suggest that *Beloved* anticipated the suicidal terrorist attacks of September 11 and the War on Terror.

Miller finds *Beloved* "an uncanny, even a terrifying or terrorizing, book" (2007: 27). He provides three evident reasons for his characterization of the novel as a terrorizing text: a) "It raises ghosts, the ghosts of those sixty million or more African Americans whom or whose forefathers and foremothers we white people brought to the US as slaves and domesticated within our borders. *Es spukt*" (Miller 27). b) It moves from clearly defined boundaries to a disquieting borderland (Miller 28). c) It "exemplifies" what Miller following Jacques Derrida calls the logic or structure of autoimmunity, which Miller defines as the structure of "the body's immune system repelling foreign invaders and turning its immune system against itself" (Miller 31). This logic of autoimmunity enables Miller to claim that the novel is rooted in a communitarian logic which Sethe compares to the suicide bombers of September 11:

It [the logic of autoimmunity] is essential also to understanding the behavior of individuals within that community, as in Sethe's decision to cut her baby daughter's

throat with a handsaw so she can get her to safety on the other side, that is, to kill the best part of herself. In a similar way, the behavior of Islamic “terrorist” suicide bombers only makes sense if we take into account their belief that they will become holy martyrs and go straight to a glorious life in heaven, just as the behavior of George W. Bush and Company only makes sense in the context of their belief that the end of the world is at hand and that only the Christian faithful will be saved, and just as, Derrida observes, the techno-capitalist system depends on faith in the working of more and more complicated machines whose functioning we do not understand. (Miller 31)

On the one hand, Miller’s identification of the structure or logic of autoimmunity effectively explains Sethe’s “suicidal” act of destroying the best part of herself in order to preserve it, thereby making her a figure closer to contemporary terrorists than to nineteenth century fugitives. By comparing Sethe to George W. Bush and even to the slaveholders (which he does elsewhere in the essay), Miller’s universalist presentist theoretical approach runs the risk of erasing the history of slavery, the structure of empire and African Americans’ resistance against slavery. Miller firmly locates Sethe’s terroristic suicide in African American community, thereby casting her actions as communal or collective; but he also traces the similarities between Sethe and suicide bombers or Bush without showing their relationship with one another. His universalist indifference to singularity not only does injustice to Sethe’s desperate act of ethical transgression and the resultant trauma and suffering, but he also does injustice to Derrida’s deconstruction. If deconstruction represents a singular event of difference intending to destabilize any universalist and presentist (grand)narratives or politics, any discussion resurrecting the logic of self-similarity, ipseity or purity would only be a target for a deconstructionist critique, not a product of a deconstructionist analysis.

Miller cites Derrida’s discussion of autoimmunity in parts only without paying much attention to the philosopher’s extensive analysis of the topic in *Philosophy in the Time of Terror* where he identifies three important moments of autoimmunitary terror: a) suicidal autoimmunity represented by the suicide bombers of September 11, but also by “the suicide of those who

welcomed, armed and trained” the bombers in the United States (Derrida 2003: 95); b) traumatic autoimmunity visible in the wound inflicted by the events of September 11 which “remains open by our terror before the *future* and not only the past . . . A weapon wounds and leaves forever open an unconscious scar, but this weapon is terrifying because it comes from the to-come, from the future” (96-97); c) autoimmunitary repetition compulsion in which one act of terror initiates reprisals in person or by proxy ad infinitum (200).

It is not difficult to see that Derrida’s concept of autoimmunitary terror involves much more than Miller’s universally applicable fractal logic of community which emphasizes only one aspect of autoimmunity: (de)construction of boundaries by destroying self-immunity. Miller does not see any difference between the events of September 11, Bush’s war on terror, Sethe’s killing of her daughter, and the borderland experiences of *any* community. Derrida, on the other hand, suggests that September 11 is a singular event not just because the target of the attack was the World Trade Center in New York, the business capital of America, but also because it was doubly suicidal and traumatic and it initiated repetition compulsion ad infinitum. Going beyond the communal beliefs of the terrorists, Derrida locates in the events an open wound that refuses to heal. If we translate Derrida’s language of terror and wound into the discursive world of *Beloved*, what is most terrorizing in the novel is not just Sethe’s autoimmunitary killing of her daughter through which she destroys her own immunity or defenses in her bid to save the best part of herself. It is what follows the event or what still remains *to come* in the novel – the arrival of the ghost, and later of Beloved herself as guest in order to terrorize Sethe and other survivors of slavery. The fractal logic of self-similarity does not seem to fully explain the energy and terror unleashed by the ghost and Beloved’s resurrection. What terrorizes the most in the novel is the unexpected coming back of Beloved first as a venomous baby ghost, then as her resurrected self. The arrival of the ghost and the return of Beloved as a revenant surpass the logic instituted by Sethe’s act of murder, thereby making them matters of absolute aporia, incomprehension and undecidability. We cannot prepare for these events as they exceed our horizons of expectations. One can only face them in fear and trembling in our utter unpreparedness.

If Miller's analogy (in which Sethe is compared at once to the suicide bomber, the slaveholder and Bush, the commander-in-chief in America's war on terror), triumphantly identifies Sethe as an agent of terrorism, Derrida's autoimmunitary terror underscores the opposite of identification, knowledge and comprehension. In *Philosophy in the Time of Terror*, Derrida underscores the "question of knowledge" vis-à-vis September 11, and he notes that "what remains 'infinite' in this wound, is that we do not *know* what it is and so do not know how to describe, identify, or even name it" (94). For Derrida, a singular event such as September 11 represents the very "horizon of non-knowledge," or "the non-horizon of knowledge," which marks our "powerlessness to comprehend, recognize, cognize, identify, name, describe and foresee" (94). If we deploy Derrida's insights to examine terror in *Beloved* we must begin not with any universalist analogy or structure of autoimmunity, but with this singular terror of not-knowing the nature of Sethe's acts and the wound that her actions open or the ghosts that they resurrect.

While attempting to relate the circumstances of Beloved's killing to Paul D, one of the ghostly apparitions from her past life in Sweet Home, Kentucky, Sethe starts circling around the room, gnawing on something other than the point she was trying to get at. This is how the narrator captures Sethe's inability of knowing or communicating what she did:

Sethe knew that the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one. That she could never close in, pin it down for anybody who had to ask. If they did not get it right off – she could never explain. Because the truth was simple, not a long drawn-out record of flowered shifts, tree cages, selfishness, ankle ropes and wells. Simple: she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized the schoolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (Morrison 163)

Sethe needs to go in circles when attempting to explain the circumstances of her daughter's death not just because, as a traumatic experience, it is difficult for her to talk about it. Unlike her careful and daring planning to escape from Sweet Home, Kentucky (even though in the escape too she had to improvise constantly because her husband failed to keep an appointment), her action after the arrival of the slave catchers was mostly spontaneous – that is why she describes it as simple. There was no time to think about it, and when everything was done, she was not sure what she had done; and she was also not sure about the consequences or effects of her actions. Thus in contrast to Miller's comparison between a slaveholder's exposure and autoimmune terror in which he risks a terrifying and apparently self-destructive act of killing what profits him, Sethe's decision to kill her daughter – which she does not admit as killing, rather she calls it carrying her over there to a place of safety – was not the same as the elaborate devices of torture such as the ankle ropes, tree cages or wells erected by her ex-masters. Not that it is simply difficult for her to talk about it (on the contrary it was so simple), but that she does not know how to discuss with others the reasons, significance or meaning of her actions. That is the case because what she committed cannot be explained in terms of reason, calculation, justification, duty, ethics, family, selfishness or profit and loss.

The Double Gift of Death in *Beloved*

Sethe's transgressive act of "love" (described by Paul D as "thick love") entails absolute not-knowing, which exceeds all expectations or justification, and resembles what Derrida would call the gift of death. In *The Gift of Death* (1996), Derrida examines the aporia of the gift of death through the example of Abraham's sacrifice of his son. Derrida argues that while it is too easy to interpret Abraham's sacrifice of his son as God's command through which God wanted to cause fear and trembling in Abraham, it can also be said to produce another form of terror which Derrida calls "*mysterium tremendum*." Derrida interprets God's injunction to sacrifice Isaac and God's intervention at the last moment as a timeless moment (a moment that does not

allow enough time to act) in which he wants a gift in the form of a sacrifice as a sign of Abraham's unconditional love for God. God, according to Derrida, seems to entreat that:

I see that you have understood what absolute duty means, namely how to respond to the absolute other, to his call, request, or command. These different registers amount to the same thing: by commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, to put his son to death by offering a gift of death to God, by means of this double gift wherein the gift of death consists in putting to death by raising one's knife over someone and of putting death forward by giving it as an offering, God leaves him free to refuse – and that is the test. The command requests, like a prayer from God, a declaration of love that implores: tell me that you love me, tell me that you turn towards me, towards the unique one, towards the other as unique and, above all, over everything else, unconditionally, and in order to do that, make a gift of death, give death to your only son and give me the death I ask for, that I give to you by asking you for it. (71-72)

The gift of death does not follow any "logic" – it is illogical, irrational, un-structured, and unethical. It is the condition of unconditional love – the love that Abraham must demonstrate both for his son who he is about to sacrifice, and for God who his son is an intended gift to. One cannot present anything as a gift without valuing it highly; in the same way, one cannot claim to have sacrificed someone whom one does not love. Sethe's murder of Beloved is such a gift of death through which she demonstrates her utmost and unconditional love for her daughter. She loved her daughter so much that she had, as Derrida would say about Abraham and his son, "the courage to behave like a murderer in the eyes of the world and of your loved ones, in the eyes of morality, politics, and of the generality of the general or of your kind" (72). Sethe must pass through this ordeal or terror, this *mysterium tremendum*, in order to make sure that she can respond to the call of her singular duty; that she is willing to, and capable of fulfilling her absolute duty beyond all laws, regulations, expectations and logic of duty as a mother, even when and especially when that duty requires the gift of death. One of the two major differences between Abraham and Sethe would be that if the former grounds his sacrifice on the call from

the absolute other – God, Sethe only listens to the fury inside her, to the unformulated, unrepresentable or unknown something called the little hummingbird desirous to break free from the cage. The other major difference is that if Abraham gets a timely divine intervention which prevents him from actually killing his son, no such interferences occur in Sethe's case; as a result of which her terrorizing experience of the gift of death together with its fear and trembling remains endless and perpetual.

This gift of death as the condition of responsibility in *Beloved* opens a new dimension in which Sethe cannot and should not die for her daughter, instead she gives the gift of death to Beloved not in order to get rid of her nor in order to be free from a mother's responsibility in the face of recapture, but in order precisely to reassert her responsibility, so as to make sure that she responds to the command or the prayer coming from herself and her daughter that she save the best part of herself from schoolteacher. Where schoolteacher finds nothing to respond to, nothing to claim – “there was nothing there to claim” (149) – thereby making a mockery of Miller's comparison between the slave and the slave-master, Sethe claims Beloved as her daughter; and she receives her back (from the cruel economy of slavery) as a gift by giving the gift of death to her. This double gift reveals the condition of hospitality in the novel.

As Emile Benveniste has shown, “the foundation of the institution of hospitality” lies in exchanging gifts (1973: 77). He argues that hospitality involves the notion of reciprocity in which “a man is bound to another by the obligation to compensate a gift or service from which he has benefitted” (77). For Benveniste, this results in a compact or agreement of hospitality. It is the duty (*munus*) of a guest to give a gift to the host. The one who fails the obligation to make the due return is called “*immunis*” or the one who does not fulfill his or her duty, does not reciprocate in the exchange of gifts (79). In this sense autoimmunity – which contains the same root as in “*immunis*” or non-reciprocity – would imply a giving in which there is no expectation of return. Sethe's gift of death is autoimmune not because her act is communally self-destructive like that of a suicide bomber, but because it is an asymmetrical form of gift giving or hospitality in which one gives without expecting anything in return. To put it differently,

“immunitary” giving, which defies communal rules of reciprocity or all recognized laws of hospitality, is a kind of gift giving in a situation of hospitality in which the host or guest has no idea what he or she will receive, if at all, in return. Unlike the communal agreement or compact, which Benveniste locates at the heart of the institution of hospitality, this radical hospitality, begins with the law of “immunity” that frees the guest or the hosts not only from any obligations or expectations of reciprocity but also of identification or of being an identifiable, located and cognizable human subject. A guest in the framework of reciprocal, communal and cosmopolitan hospitality is a stranger, xenos or visitor, but an arrivant in an immunitary context of hospitality is more like the “ghost,” who as Benveniste shows, is at once host, guest and enemy. Such a guest does not represent the return of the repressed inasmuch as he or she is a revenant asymmetrical to the structure which gave it the gift of death. His or her return is asymmetrical insofar as we cannot prepare for the guest’s arrival nor can we ascertain the time or location of the revenant.

The autoimmunitary terror in *Beloved* results not just from Sethe’s gift of death through which she assumes her responsibility as mother. It rather comes from her being a party in the immunitary and asymmetrical relation of gift-giving and hospitality in which she does not know what/who arrives at her door steps, and when. In *Of Hospitality*, Derrida describes this transgressive hospitality as hyperbolic or unconditional hospitality (2000: 75). He notes that in hyperbolic and autoimmunitary hospitality such as the one we see taking place in *Beloved*, “the host becomes a retained hostage” (Derrida 107). Derrida adds that “[e]veryone is hostage to the dead man, beginning with the favorite host” (107). Sethe’s responsibility as mother who gives the gift of death to her daughter makes Sethe a hostage of the revenant that revisits her first as a ghost then as an incarnation which she believes is her daughter resurrected. The gift of death as an event thus is sandwiched between the experience of terror and responsibility of hospitality.

Hospitality in *Beloved*

Hospitality is at work in *Beloved* at three different sites: geographical, physical, and spectral. As a fugitive from a slave-state, Sethe's journey from South to North in search of freedom and refuge represents the first site of hospitality, which, as we all know is filled with terror. Whenever I look through the windows of my campus office in Huntington and see Kentucky on the other side of the Ohio river, and watch the traffic moving seamless across the bridges that connect the Tri-States, I think about Sethe or Margaret Garner. I cannot imagine that this contiguous and now almost identical terrain could have been so hazardous for a fugitive like Sethe, who must have risked her life at every step from Sweet Home [where "rape seemed the solitary gift of life" (Morrison 10)] to Cincinnati [where a tragedy and terror awaited her]. Morrison compares this journey to "hurting" as she describes Sethe's encounter on her way to Cincinnati with Amy Denver, who massages Sethe's swollen and bruised feet and says: "It's gonna hurt now. . . Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (Morrison 35). As both take each other to be ghosts, this meeting only gives a premonition of more spectral things to come. The house, 124, the ghost haunts "was a way station where messages came and then the senders" (65), which confuses hospitality with haunting. As Homi Bhabha reminds us, "we see how [in *Beloved*] the most tragic and intimate act of violence is performed in a struggle to push back the boundaries of the slave world" (1994: 17). The confusion of terror and home and hospitality is also captured by Achille Mbembe, who argues that a colonial space is "a place of terror and horror," resulting from the colonial potentate's torture of the colonized subject (2010: 48). Even though Sethe escapes the South, its torture and horror will forever haunt her, and the North as a place of refuge will never be free from the horror of the colony.

The play of bodies appearing and disappearing, and bodies as sites of torture as well as nurture constitute the second site of hospitality in *Beloved*. Sethe literally explodes while giving birth to Denver on her way to Cincinnati. Upon her arrival, Baby Suggs notices that she is "all mashed up and split open" (135). When seeing Sethe's back, Amy exclaims: "'It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here is the trunk – it's red and split wide open, full of sap, and here's the parting for the branches'" (Morrison 75). Sethe recalls how "'Schoolteacher made one [boy] open up my back, when it closed it made a tree'" (17). These explosions differ from both the

self-suicidal explosions of terrorists and the explosions carried out in the war on terror as they aim not at achieving martyrdom or at procuring a safe haven for a certain community at the cost of others. Instead these explosions indicate opening oneself – both physically as well as emotionally – so that the other can be born and find a place of refuge in the world. Splitting open, exposing oneself to the other and making oneself vulnerable, as Emmanuel Levinas would put, constitute being hospitable to the other in *Beloved*. In *Otherwise Than Being*, Levinas defines vulnerability as the non-initiative and passive “anarchy of the Good” (Levinas 75). This passive sensibility of having been offered without any holding back is “what all protection and all absence of protection already presuppose: vulnerability itself” (Levinas 75). To be vulnerable is at once to protect and to effect an absence of all protection. Sethe kills her daughter while seeking to protect her children precisely by eliminating all protections for them and herself. Sethe’s anarchic good through which she wounds herself in wounding her daughter makes room for Beloved to be received.

Spectrality in *Beloved* represents the third site of hospitality. Morrison herself underscores spectrality by arguing in “The Unspeakable Things Unspoken” (1989) that we must trace “the ghost in the machine” of American literature to articulate its silences and absences (Morrison 11). Critics who discuss Morrison’s deployment of ghosts and haunting in *Beloved* and elsewhere believe that for Morrison “the visionary artist or writer serves as a medium” in order to make it “possible for the surviving spirit of African cultural traditions to manifest itself on the physical plane” (Mullen, 2000: 627). Though many believe that “*Beloved* is a ghost story” (Franco, 2006: 416), some contend that this “subgenre” is “an interruption of ‘real’ history, a bad joke in the middle of a sad story” (Kiely, 1993: 215). Though the novel “brings into daylight the ‘ghosts’ that are harbored by memory and that hold their ‘hosts’ in thrall” (Lawrence, 1991: 189), the ghost for some merely represents the gothic or a mystery or fantasy (Skinner, 1997: 89). For some readers, Beloved is not a supernatural being, instead she is “a young woman who has herself suffered the horrors of slavery” (House, 1990: 17). Schroeder distinguishes between the baby ghost and Beloved (Schroeder, 2004: 98); Bailey moves beyond the ghost story to locate in *Beloved* “the haunted house formula” (1999: 8). Avery Gordon discerns new

interconnections between space and spectrality in the novel by noting that in *Beloved* “the ghost’s double voice speaks not only of Sethe’s dead child but also of an unnamed African girl lost at sea, not yet become an African American” (2008: 140). Deborah Horvitz argues that as a “powerful corporeal ghost who creates matrilineal connection between Africa and America, *Beloved* stands for every African woman whose story will never be told” (1989: 157).

Beloved opens unexpectedly with the ghost – “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby venom” (Morrison 3) – as if the ghost did not give any time to the narrator to properly announce its arrival or as if *it* preceded the act of narrating itself. By beginning with the ghost, Morrison seems to suggest that the ghost is what provides the “ground” for the story; *it* acts as the host to the narrative. A similar unexpectedness surrounds *Beloved*’s appearance in Cincinnati where a “fully dressed woman walked out of the water . . . nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her” (50). A little later in the novel the narrator describes *Beloved* as a peculiar “guest,” and implies that her unexpected and mysterious appearance in town can only be explained in terms of visitation or apparition; and she can only be called a guest. By deploying this figure of the ghost/guest, Morrison suggests that hospitality is unthinkable without first welcoming this ghost who exceeds all expectations and defies any categorization. As her rambling monologue in the novel reveals – “. . . there is no place where I stop . . . I need to find a place to be” (210, 213) – *Beloved* cannot share a definitive or bounded place with them. Though preceding the family, the city and the community, *Beloved* as a guest/ghost/host enables these structures to emerge. That is the reason why Denver starts to dream about the perfect family. “My daddy was an angel man,” says Denver, adding that they “should be together. Me, him and *Beloved*” (208-9).

Sethe once suggested to Baby Suggs that they move out of 124 in order to get rid of the baby ghost. Baby Suggs replied that it would be pointless to move out of the house, for “[n]ot a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison 5). She adds that they were lucky that the ghost was a baby; if her husband or all of her children were to return, they would worry their “house into evil” (5). Contrary to Baby Suggs’ expectations, *Beloved* seems to combine the ghostly transfiguration of Baby Suggs, her children, Sethe’s

daughter and many other dead Africans lost to the Middle Passage.⁴ Toward the end of the novel, Paul D asks Denver if she thought Beloved was her sister; as if echoing the epigraph with which the novel begins – Sixty million and more – Denver replies: “At times. At times I think she was more” (266). Beloved embodies this ambivalent subjectivity not only straddling across the realm of the living and the dead, individual and collectivity, and mother and daughter but also stretching from the continent of North America to Africa.

The spectral site of hospitality coalesces here with the other two – geographical and physical. The Middle Passage makes a ghostly appearance in Sethe’s crossing of the Ohio. Citing a passage after Beloved’s “exorcism” in the novel in which Morrison describes how “all trace is gone and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too” (Spivak 275), Gayatri Spivak argues that Morrison’s “geological time” represents “the experience of a planetarity” (2003: 88). Exorcism of Beloved undoubtedly implies denial of hospitality to the revenant by the African American community of Cincinnati. Juxtaposing this community is the impossible collectivity of the living and the dead in which emerges a tentative planetarity in spite of or in the wake of the erasure of footprints of the revenant. This collectivity represents the provisional structure of hospitality in the novel. If Beloved’s disappearance becomes planetary after her resurrected self vanishes, she represents a threat or terror which is global in scope, and whose specter seems to claim, as Derrida would note, the whole world as its hostage.

Notes

1. The “us versus them” equation finds center-stage in Kevin Borgeson and Robin Valeri’s *Terrorism in America* where the authors argue that the “dichotomy” of us versus them not only “demonizes” the out-group it is “a key component” to many “theories of terrorism” (151). Maryam Sakeenah relates this dictum to Huntington’s “clash of civilization to argue that “9/11 seemed to verify and prove” Huntington’s hypothesis (xvi). The other narrative is a quote from Slavoj Zizek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*.
2. Though a fictional work, Morrison’s *Beloved* has some historical basis. Referring to Morrison’s discovery of Margaret Garner’s story in which she killed her child, Marilyn Mobley notes that in *Beloved* “history simultaneously becomes both theme and narrative process” (68). For Kader Aki, *Beloved* shows “how history is not over and done with” as it narrates “African American history through non-western eyes” (1). Tally reads *Beloved* as “the reclamation of black history in its fullest array” (xv). It “constructs a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and historical or national process” (Krumholz 107). *Beloved* accommodates inherited culture and history by negotiating between the cultural and historical worlds it inhabits (Rushdy 141).
3. Bernard Bell defines “neo-slave narratives” as texts in which “black fabulators combine elements of fables, legends and slave narratives to protest racism and justify the deeds struggles, migrations, and spirit of black people” (285). Charles Heglar argues that *Beloved* is a neo-slave narrative, “a form of historical fiction” narrating a “slave woman’s story of slavery, freedom and family” (149).
4. Sethe’s story of slavery mediated through a mother’s infanticide is not only a story based on the tragedy of Margaret Garner’s killing of her child; “it is the affirmation and reclamation of the millions of voices lost as the result of the middle passage” (Ivory 31).

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